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STUDENTS AT CAMP UPTON

WILLIS FLETCHER JOHNSON

"I HOPE, sir, that I shall be able to learn to read and write while I am here."

It was a stalwart young man, of twenty-four or twenty-five, who said it; with a wistfulness and a pathos that the words alone fail to convey. He was a native of Florida; of Anglo-Saxon stock; with half a dozen generations of American ancestors. Legally, he would be eligible to the Presidency of the United States. And in the early years of the twentieth century, in the country which boasts the greatest free school system in the world, he had grown to manhood unable to read or write his native tongue.

"Where were you born?" my friend the Major asked in passing another young man, who was laboriously writing a few simple words in an unformed, childish hand, but regarding them with something of the pride which the sculptor feels at liberating the hidden angel from the block of stone. "In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, sir," he replied. "Did you never go to school when you were a child?" "Not a day, sir, until I came here." "Why not?" "Well, sir, my mother died when I was nine days old, and my father when I was four years; and—I had to make my living." And so, almost within the shadow of Independence Hall, he was permitted to grow to manhood unable to read the Declaration that made that Hall famous.

"Why did you come here?" I asked another. "Well, sir, it was like this. Up in Michigan, where I was born, I could scarcely make a living. You see, sir, I had never had a chance to learn to read and write, and so the only work I could get was shoveling sand or something like that. And I had to have foreigners, sir, who weren't even citizens of the United States, bossing me and getting three or four times my pay, just because they could read and write and I

couldn't. So I came here, sir, for they told me that here I could learn to read and write."

Such were the testimonies, given by the score and hundred, all through that memorable autumn afternoon. There were there hundreds of Americans citizens, many of them of long American descent. And they were, or had been a few weeks or months before, illiterate. In our piping days of peace and prosperity, in our days of non-militarism, with the army reduced to a skeleton and no thought of rational preparedness even for defence, in the days when the schoolmaster was abroad and, in Brougham's words, we trusted to him, armed with his primer, against the soldier in full military array, when we were boasting on the Fourth of July of our unrivalled system of universal, free, popular education—in those days, these men were growing up illiterate, unable to sign their names or to read the Constitution of the United States.

Then there were along with them some other hundreds; men not native to the soil, but immigrants from more different lands than were to be numbered in the League of Nations. Arron Cless, from Transylvania; Hussein Bermahnd, from Morocco; Jan Fajkowski, from Poland; Fermin Manrique, from Venezuela; Konstantines Michopetros, from Greece; Antonio Rizzo, from Argentina; Salvatore Palmitore, from Italy; Ignatz Schopinski, from Russia; Boty Kalcheff, from Bulgaria; Kusti Franti, from Sweden; Jose Benitez, from Spain; Stephen Bognar, from Hungary; John Jukica, from Austria; Antony Coite, from Algeria; John Arends, from the Netherlands; Armando Eguilus, from Mexico; Sylvester Bachunas, from Lithuania; Michael Myatowych, from Dalmatia—representatives in all of forty-three different races or nationalities. Some had been brought hither in childhood; some had come hither in young manhood. Under our benign system of open door, or open house, we had welcomed them all, and then neglected them. They had come hither as aliens, and we had suffered them to remain aliens, unable to read or write a word of our national language, and therefore unable to acquaint themselves with our history and our laws, or even with the printed records of current events, save as such information was filtered to them scantily and too often inaccurately through an alien medium. Incidentally, we were also preparing ourselves intelligently to

wonder and reasonably to complain at their failure to become thoroughly Americanized and assimilated, and at the ominous growth of Socialism, Communism, Bolshevism and what not among them.

But now these, native and foreign born alike and together, were learning to read and write the English language, promptly, practically, thoroughly. How, where, and why?

Ninety years before, Brougham had said, as already quoted: "The soldier can do nothing in our day. The schoolmaster is abroad, and I trust to him, armed with his primer, against the soldier in full military array." The schoolmaster is still abroad, very much more than Brougham's utmost vision scanned when he made his confident boast. But the relations between the schoolmaster and the soldier are very different from those which Brougham anticipated.

For the schoolmaster had quite failed these men, of whom I am writing, and they were being cared for instead by the soldier. They were themselves soldiers. They were getting, because they were soldiers, the instruction which the schoolmaster had neglected to give them. They had become soldiers largely in order that they might thus learn. Not one of them, probably, would ever have learned to read and write English if he had not become a soldier. For this was the Recruit Educational Centre at Camp Upton that I was visiting, and in which I was thus finding human clods transformed into intelligent men, mere brawn endowed with brain.

"Oh, well," says somebody, "it is not surprising that in a nation of a hundred and ten millions there are a few hundreds of illiterates to be found."

A few hundreds! If that were all! For significant as was this spectacle before me, still more significant was the cause that had led to its existence. It was the failure of the schoolmaster to meet the vital necessities of the nation, or the failure of the nation to utilize him for meeting those necessities, which had literally compelled the camp to take up the work of the classroom, the army to become an academy. For years we had been boasting of the intelligence of the nation, and of a percentage of illiteracy so small as to be negligible. The census reports were flattering, of course. It is "as easy as lying" for an illiterate to

answer "Yes" when the canvasser asks "Can you read and write?" He is not required to prove it by the act. But when the great war came on and we had to summon soldiers to fight for the nation's life, there was a different showing. The examining boards under the conscription act were not content with such facile question and answer. They got the facts. And the appalling fact that they found out was that of the young men of military age in the United States, so far at least as the national language was concerned, about one in every four was illiterate. To be exact, 24.9 per cent of them were unable to read the Constitution of the United States or an American newspaper, or to write a letter in English to the folks at home.

It was a serious situation. Under the law of 1889, enacted in time of peace and self-glorification, a man could not be enlisted in the army unless he could speak, read and write the English language. But the blistering, damning fact was that there were not enough men with such knowledge of English to fill up the quotas of the army. We had either to accept illiterates, or to go without the soldiers who were needed imperatively to fight the Hun. There could of course be no hesitation in such a matter, and so an emergency law was passed, under which there were enrolled hundreds of thousands of men who could not read nor write, and many of whom could not speak, the language of the nation.

Then it was that a member of the General Staff, Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard Lentz,—it would scarcely be exaggeration to add, *clarum et venerabile nomen!*—conceived the scheme of the Development Battalion, and organized and directed it. The purpose of that extraordinary body was to couple up a course of elementary instruction in English with the necessary instruction in military affairs. The idea was to give the men after they had enlisted the qualification which the law—before the emergency act—had required them to have before enlisting. During the war such a battalion was formed in every camp in the country, and it was found that in them in three months or less the men learned English sufficiently to enable them to receive, understand, execute and transmit verbal or written orders, and to read and understand drill regulations as printed in soldiers' handbooks, and therefore, of course, any ordinary book, newspaper or other printed matter in

the English language—three months or less from illiteracy to literacy!

Now Colonel Lentz was able not alone to devise and to execute this great work, but also—which is most to the present point—to appreciate its results and their potential significance to the army and to the nation. The work had been done to meet an emergency in time of war. Why not continue it, to meet an emergency in time of peace, the emergency which every nation must meet when it finds a quarter of its young men illiterate. He saw no reason why the work of the Development Battalion should cease with the ending of the war, or why the physical, mental and moral benefits which had accrued from it because of the war should not be continued indefinitely in time of peace.

His plan was to establish in each army camp a Recruit Education Centre, in which to give instruction to illiterate Americans and to aliens ignorant of the language and principles of the country. This would of course necessitate the repeal of the act of 1889, which ruled all such men out of the army. It took him about six weeks to convince the Secretary of War and the Chief of the General Staff that it was worth while to make the experiment, and to get permission to open such an Education Centre at Camp Upton. The Centre was opened on May 1 last. In September following a little company of twenty-eight graduates of the school went "on the road" to show the practical results of the work. The twenty-eight included representatives of fourteen different nationalities. On May 1 not one of them had been able to read or write a word of English, or knew anything of military drill or tactics. In September, before multitudes of critical spectators in the chief cities east of the Mississippi River, they displayed the bearing and performed the evolutions of veteran soldiers, and in addition a competent mastery of both spoken and printed English speech. Illiterate "rookies" had in four months become accomplished soldiers and intelligent men.

That is the work that is being done at Camp Upton. But that is not all. These men are being made not only well-trained soldiers, but American soldiers; not only intelligent men, but intelligent American citizens.

These men are being endowed with American minds, and taught to think American thoughts, and to look at things from an American point of view. For they learn

not only the traditional three R's, but also history and geography, especially American, and civics—the fundamental principles of American government and political, industrial and social organization. They are led to take an intelligent American view, not alone of historical facts but also of current events and conditions. Note how they deal with the “dismal science” of political economy:

He was, I believe, an Italian. He listened with rapt attention to a discussion of the high cost of living, and strikes, and what not else, dawning appreciation kindling in his face till at last it blazed forth in words:

“I see! I see! I get two dollar a day. Not enough. So I strike, get four dollars; twice as well off as before. Pretty soon fellow in shop across the street, he strikes too. He get four dollars. Some other fellows strike; all get more wages. So many strikes, so little work done, things get scarce, prices go up. Pretty soon when I go to buy things, my four dollars not buy as much as two did. Strike no good!”

And I thought, What a pity that some officers of labor unions and Members of Congress could not for three months be “rookies” at Camp Upton!

What do the men think of it? One of the staff said to me at Upton, in the presence of two or three-score of the student-rookies: “If there’s anything wrong with the food, the men grumble. If their clothes are not right, they kick. But if there’s any cutting down or slackening of school work, there’s a riot!” And the men standing around heard him, and vigorously smiled and nodded assent. And as dusk was falling at the close of a November day in which, since morning, the men had been hard at work, studying, reciting, drilling, marching and countermarching in review, a day’s work that would have driven both the “grinds” and the football squad of a college to revolt, or to collapse, I saw hundreds of the men, physically so weary that only military pride kept them from drooping, resolutely clinging to their desks and seeking the last words of instruction, and finally leaving the school rooms with manifest reluctance and regret when the over-wearied teachers were compelled to dismiss them for the day.

What do they think of it? There was one, a Dane; who “took a day off” and went up to New York. Coming back, he brought six of his countrymen, who because of

what he had told them of the army wanted to join it too. "Good work!" commented his commanding officer; "Glad to have you keep it up." "I could bring a lot more, sir," he replied, "but—well, sir, I can't afford it." "Can't afford it? What do you mean?" "Why, sir, it costs me so much for their railroad fares down here!" The officer promptly assured him that a way would be found to relieve him of such expenses for all the men he might bring, and then suggested that he might take a furlough, to give him a well-earned vacation from camp work and also an opportunity for recruiting work. But his countenance fell. "Please, sir, I thank you; but—no furlough. It would keep me out of school so long!"

The army, you see, is a very wicked and disgraceful thing. It is the embodiment of mere physical force, as opposed to intellectual and spiritual forces. It is, according to our Pacifist friends, distinctly brutalizing in its tendencies. A soldier, according to our Socialist friends, is essentially a brute; in the lowest possible scale of humanity. What better demonstration of these propositions could be found than those which I found at Camp Upton?

The men at Upton, and at all the other camps, if only the Government will provide for the perpetuation and extension of the system, will many of them at the end of three years return to civil life. They left it illiterate and inefficient; they will return to it literate and efficient. They left it aliens; they will return to it Americans. And but for the three months or more at Upton and three years in the army they would remain all their lives what they were before, illiterate, inefficient, aliens. Is it not worth while, just for their own sake, to do this thing? And is it not worth while a thousand fold to do it for the sake of the innumerable others whom they will influence? For every one of these men, returning to civil life, will be an evangelist of intelligence and of Americanism, in those very *partibus infidelium* which we have smugly and inhumanly permitted to be developed within our own borders.

WILLIS FLETCHER JOHNSON.